

# Fake Buddha Stories

<https://fakebuddhaquotes.com/category/fake-buddha-stories/>

## Does God exist?

There are a number of versions of the following story in circulation:

One day in the early morning Gautama Buddha was sitting in a garden quietly with his disciples. A man arrived silently and stood in the shadows, that man was a great devotee of Lord Rama. He had built many temples across the country, he had devoted many years in the service of Lord Rama. He would always chant Rama's name and contemplate on Rama's greatness. He was old and close to his last years. Even after many years of dedicated spiritual effort he was not realized.

He wanted to know for sure if there is a God or not? When he heard about the realized one (Buddha), he came to get his doubt cleared. When he felt nobody would notice him talking to Siddhartha, the Buddha. He asked Gautama "O enlightened one, Please tell me the truth! and truth only. Is there a god?".

Buddha, from his intuition knew that man to be a great devotee of Lord Rama, he looked at that man with seriousness and said "No, My friend. There is no god".

Buddha's disciples that were gathered there were very relieved and joyous to finally know the truth that there was no god. They all started muttering between them, sharing what the Buddha had just told. Whenever a disciple had asked that question to Buddha he would become silent. So they never knew.

His words spread through the whole town, the whole town was celebrating the day on which the truth of NO GOD was revealed by the enlightened. They were finally free of the ideas of hell, heaven and of somebody sitting up to judge one's actions.

It was getting late in the evening, and once again the disciples came back and sat around the Buddha.

There was a materialist who had been an atheist all his life, he had convinced 1000s of people that there was no god, he used to go to the priests and scholars and defeat them in the argument about god.

He too was getting old and little suspicion arose in him, “what if there is god? isn’t it waste of my life to spread the “NO GOD” message if there is god?” he thought. He was eaten by this doubt, he finally decided to know the truth and sought the enlightened one.

He slowly came up to where Buddha was sitting, and asked him “They say you are enlightened, Please tell me if there is GOD?”.

Buddha knowing that man to be an atheist said with firm voice as if he is in firm conviction “Yes, there is God”. Buddha’s disciples once again were back to confusion.

Moral of the story: Belief that there is God or belief that there is no God are both equally useless, one has to realize the truth in himself with diligent self-effort. Enlightened one had told each of them what they had to know in order for them to get stronger on their spiritual quest.

This particular version is from [here](#)

There is a rather different version by Osho (aka Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) which I think may be the earliest one. It can be found [here](#).

Another version can be found [here](#).

This is a story that (I presume) Osho made up — something he was prone to doing. It’s not from the Buddhist scriptures.

The Buddha did use different language and different spiritual models depending on his audience. So when talking to monks he would talk in terms of the spiritual goal being nibbana, or liberation from the rounds of rebirth. When talking with householders he was more likely to talk in terms of being reborn in heaven and avoiding hell.

What were his views on God, or gods, we should say, since he lived and taught in a polytheistic society?

First, the Buddha’s teaching is incompatible with an eternal, omnipotent God, and [he thought such a belief to be spiritually harmful](#), since it diminishes our sense of personal responsibility. He did often talk as if gods such as Brahma existed, and described conversations with them. In these stories Brahma frequently comes off as a buffoon, and I think we can safely take such stories to be satirical in intent.

In one such story (in [the Brahmajala Sutta](#)) he pokes fun at Brahma as having deluded himself into thinking that he was the creator of everything. [In another sutta](#) he described Baka Brahma as “immersed in ignorance” for believing himself and his heaven as being permanent and said that the Brahma and his entire retinue were under the sway of Mara (roughly the Buddhist equivalent of the devil).

Toward the end of the [Kevaddha Sutta](#) the Buddha recounts an episode in which Brahma confessed to being afraid of the other gods’ reaction if they discovered that he couldn’t answer

questions put to him by one of the Buddha's disciples — questions that the Buddha was able to answer.

Sometimes gods played positive roles in early Buddhist texts. Most famously, when the Buddha was newly awakened and unsure whether it would be possible for him to teach his realization to others, [Brahma Sahampati appeared](#) and encouraged him to work for the benefit of suffering beings. In this I suspect we're hearing the words of the Buddha's own compassionate nature communicating to him. Another time [Brahma Sahampati gave the Buddha advice on lifestyle](#):

Let the wilderness serve for your seat and bed!  
Go about set free from the ties that bind.  
But if, perchance, you don't find there your bliss, then  
Live in a group — but watch over yourself:  
Mindful, proceeding for alms from house to house,  
Mindful, with guarded faculties — and wise.

Sometimes gods came to the Buddha as disciples, and heard teachings from him. Sometimes they gave teachings to monks.

There are always going to be some people who will be annoyed by me saying this but my sense is that the Buddha did not believe in gods, and that his stories involving them were either satirical or poetic. This particular story, however, was not one he told.

Posted on [October 10, 2017](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) [30 Comments on Does God exist?](#)

## [When Buddha had tea with Mara](#)

This is an odd (and long) one, which, because it's not a direct quote, I've put in the category of [Fake Buddha Stories](#).

Hold onto your headgear!

Tara Brach has a blog post called "Inviting Mara to Tea." Now Mara, in case you're not aware of him, is a character from the Buddha's life. He's what we'd call a "supernatural" being (although Buddhism sees him as entirely natural, but not from our realm of existence).

He represents doubt, and so most western Buddhists take his appearances as being a poetic representation of our inner doubts. He frequently appears to the Buddha and to his disciples, often in a very taunting way. [One time](#) he visited the Buddha when he was in pain from an injury, and mocked him for just lying around. He famously sent his armies to distract the Buddha from gaining awakening. [Here's](#) a reference to that encounter.

Mara appears to all of us in the form of our doubting thoughts: *I can't do this. No one likes me. Meditation is a waste of time.*

In her blog post Tara says the following about the Buddha's encounters with Mara:

Instead of ignoring Mara or driving him away, the Buddha would calmly acknowledge his presence, saying, "I see you, Mara."

He would then invite him for tea and serve him as an honored guest. Offering Mara a cushion so that he could sit comfortably, the Buddha would fill two earthen cups with tea, place them on the low table between them, and only then take his own seat. Mara would stay for a while and then go, but throughout the Buddha remained free and undisturbed.

Brach is correct at the beginning. The Buddha doesn't have to send Mara away, because Mara is a personification of the mental state of doubt. What we do with doubts is to recognize that they are not reality, but are distorted constructs in the mind. When we see our doubts as doubts, they lose their power over us. When we see Mara, Mara vanishes.

But when it comes to having tea with Mara, I'm very skeptical. For a start, there's the question of tea. According to [Wikipedia](#), tea likely originated in southwest China and wasn't commercially grown in India until the British arrived. There's no mention of tea in the Pali canon, and my Pali-English dictionaries don't even include a word for it. In fact, the only drinks I recall being mentioned in the Pali canon, with the exception of spirits and fermented beverages, which were forbidden to Buddhist practitioners, are water and (more rarely) [milk](#). Fruit juice is allowed in the monastic code of conduct, but I don't think I've ever seen it referred to in any of the discourses (suttas).

Then there's the question of receiving Mara as an honored guest, which doesn't fit with any of the encounters that I've seen.

Jack Kornfield, in his *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (page 124), has the Buddha regarding Mara not just as a guest, but as a friend:

"Oh, my old friend has come," says the Buddha, as he warmly greets Mara, inviting him in for tea.

Again with the tea! Jack goes on to say, "In one scripture the story ends when Mara becomes awakened as a Buddha himself." I think we should leave that one for another time!

Although various monks and nuns addressed Mara as "friend," as far as I'm aware the Buddha is never depicted as having referred to anyone that way, since doing so would have implied an inappropriate sense of equality. Except for times when the Buddha calls Mara by his alternative name, Namuci (a demon in Vedic mythology), he addresses him as "Evil One," *pāpimant*.

It's Thich Nhat Hanh who's most prolific with the story about Mara and the Buddha having tea. He refers to this incident in "Awakening of the Heart," "The Heart of Understanding," "No Mud, No Lotus," "A Pebble for Your Pocket," and "Under the Rose Apple Tree."

There's one long passage dealing with the Buddha's tea-break with Mara in a transcribed talk that's [available online](#).

Thich Nhat Hanh begins his story in the following way:

I would like to tell you a story that took place a number of years ago. One day I saw the Venerable Ananda—you know who he is? Ananda is a cousin of the Buddha, a very handsome man with a very good memory.

Already this is very peculiar. “One day I saw the Venerable Ananda.” What does this mean? That Nhat Hanh is recalling a previous life? That he dreamed or imagined this incident? That's he's making it up as a form of “infotainment”? (That last is the one I'd bet on.)

A little later he says “Sometimes Ananda was so concerned about the happiness of the Buddha that he forgot about himself. Sometimes he did not enjoy what was there in the present moment, being much younger than the Buddha.” The problem here is that tradition has always held that Ananda and the Buddha were exactly the same age — even born on the same day. So where Nhat Hanh is getting this from is rather a puzzle.

We're told that Mara arrives and asks to see the Buddha, which Ananda is reluctant to allow. But the Buddha welcomes his rival and addresses him as “friend.”

The story goes on to have Mara propose to the Buddha — over tea of course — that they switch roles, since being Mara is apparently hard work. The Buddha points out, though, that being a Buddha is hard work too.

Nothing about this story is familiar to me. Of course there's a lot of material in the Pali canon about Mara, and it's quite possible I've just never come across this particular one. With unusual elements such as the following —

- Mara asking to see the Buddha (traditionally he just arrives — after all he represents the Buddha's doubt and isn't a real person)
- the Buddha calling him “friend” (which he never does, preferring epithets such as “Evil One”)
- Ananda mysteriously shedding a few decades
- the role-swapping proposal
- and the puzzle of this “tea” (which Nhat Hanh calls “herbal tea” in one of his books)

— it seems odd that this amazing story should be so elusive.

At first I wondered if Nhat Hanh made this up for the purposes of entertainment, and that other teachers subsequently assumed that such a respected teacher, referring to an incident about the Buddha's life, must be referring to a canonical passage. On the other hand, there's a 1991 book by Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman that includes this story (predating any TNH reference I've found) so perhaps they're the originators, or took the story from a non-canonical (possibly commentarial) source. I'm honestly baffled!

If you've stumbled across a scriptural source for this story, please do let me know about it!

Posted on [October 21, 2016](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) [39 Comments on When Buddha had tea with Mara](#)

## [A poor man asked the Buddha, "Why am I so poor?"](#)

I've seen this particular Fake Buddha Quote several times now:

A poor man asked the Buddha, "Why am I so poor?"  
The Buddha said, "you do not learn to give."  
So the poor man said, "If I'm not having anything?"  
Buddha said: "You have a few things,  
The Face, which can give a smile;  
Mouth: you can praise or comfort others;  
The Heart: it can open up to others;  
Eyes: who can look the other with the eyes of goodness;  
Body: which can be used to help others."

The broken English ("If I'm not having anything?") suggests that it was written by someone in India. With a little literary polishing it would make a fine Hallmark card to give to your Buddhist friends on Wesak, but it's not something that's from the scriptures.

In fact this little fable seems to be brand new; I haven't found any instances of it on the web earlier than 2013. So far it doesn't seem to have made it into any books, although surely that's just a matter of time, since I've seen this appearing in a post by the well-known Western Buddhist teacher Lama Surya Das, for example.

There's nothing at all un-Buddhist about the advice given here, although I don't recall the Buddha having described the practice of giving in such a way.

Dāna and cāga (giving, liberality, generosity) were practices that the Buddha strongly promoted, and that he saw as absolutely foundational to spiritual practice. Although he primarily talked of giving not only in terms of material things, but also in non-material ways, he seems to have [conceived](#) of the latter mainly in terms of the "gift of Dhamma" (i.e. the teachings):

There are these two kinds of gifts: a gift of material things and a gift of the Dhamma. Of the two, this is supreme: a gift of the Dhamma.

Householders were typically expected to give material things in order to support the monastics. Monastics were expected to give the Dhamma, in order to spiritually support the householders.

He never, as far as I know, talked of smiling, praise, etc., as forms of giving.

I know of one teaching, the Dhana Sutta (Discourse on Wealth), where other non-material forms of giving are at least implied:

These, monks, are seven forms of wealth.  
The wealth that is confidence (saddhā),  
the wealth that is virtue (sīla),  
the wealth that is conscience (hiri) and remorse (ottapa),  
the wealth of listening (suta), generosity (cāga),  
with discernment (paññā) as the seventh form of wealth.

Since in the Buddha's view wealth had to be shared in order that it be legitimized, there's an implication that these seven things (the last of which would correspond to the giving of Dhamma) are forms of giving.

More explicitly, in the [Abhisanda Sutta](#) the Buddha described the practice of ethics (sīla, number 2 in our list above) as a form of giving, and where he referred to the five precepts as "five great gifts

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift...

(This formula is repeated for the other four precepts.)

According to Professor Damien Keown, in "A Dictionary of Buddhism," the dāna-pāramitā, or perfection of generosity, is seen in the Mahāyāna as having three aspects:

1. The giving of material things,
2. The Giving of Security and freedom from fear,
3. and the giving of the Dharma

If we take the sutta references I've given above, we can see that the Mahāyāna teaching is simply a systematization and clarification of what the Buddha taught.

So, once again, the message in our fake quotation is very Buddhist in content, but it's not a scriptural quotation and isn't a genuine quote from the Buddha. It's more akin to the teaching technique of [creative storytelling](#) that I've discussed elsewhere. This can be a valid form of teaching, but in this instance we're not even talking about a paraphrase of something the Buddha's recorded as saying, but something entirely invented.

Although I've said that the version of the quote we're discussing looks like it came from India, it may in turn be based on a parable told by the Taiwanese teacher Dharma Master Cheng Yen and published on the web in March 2013 as "[How to Give, for the Person Who Has Nothing.](#)" This

shares many elements of our Fake Buddha Quote. For example it starts with the poor man asking the Buddha:

“I am destitute and have nothing. How am I to practice giving?”

and continues:

The Buddha smiled compassionately at the man and told him, “You don’t need to be rich to give. Giving doesn’t require money. Even in poverty, with no material possessions to your name, you can still give.”

“How is this possible? What is considered ‘giving’ then?” the man asked.

“Let me teach you seven ways you can give without needing any money at all,” the Buddha replied.

“The first way you can give is to smile...”

It’s rather a long passage so I’ll let you [read the rest on the original site](#).

The first five (of seven) forms of giving that are listed here correspond exactly to the five in our suspect quote, so I’m reasonably confident it’s an adaptation and condensation of the teaching by Dharma Master Cheng Yen, unless of course both are based on a source that I haven’t yet tracked down.

Posted on [April 11, 2015](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) [24 Comments on A poor man asked the Buddha, “Why am I so poor?”](#)

## **The man who spit on Buddha’s face**

Here’s a long story. Brace yourselves:

The Buddha was sitting under a tree talking to his disciples when a man came and spat in his face. He wiped it off, and he asked the man, “What next? What do you want to say next?” The man was a little puzzled because he himself never expected that when you spit on somebody’s face, he will ask, “What next?” He had no such experience in his past. He had insulted people and they had become angry and they had reacted. Or if they were cowards and weaklings, they had smiled, trying to bribe the man. But Buddha was like neither, he was not angry nor in any way offended, nor in any way cowardly. But just matter-of-factly he said, “What next?” There was no reaction on his part.

But Buddha’s disciples became angry, and they reacted. His closest disciple, Ananda, said, “This is too much. We cannot tolerate it. He has to be punished for it, otherwise everybody will start doing things like this!”



Buddha said, “You keep silent. He has not offended me, but you are offending me. He is new, a stranger. He must have heard from people something about me, that this man is an atheist, a dangerous man who is throwing people off their track, a revolutionary, a corrupter. And he may have formed some idea, a notion of me. He has not spit on me, he has spit on his notion. He has spit on his idea of me because he does not know me at all, so how can he spit on me?”

“If you think on it deeply,” Buddha said, “he has spit on his own mind. I am not part of it, and I can see that this poor man must have something else to say because this is a way of saying something. Spitting is a way of saying something. There are moments when you feel that language is impotent: in deep love, in intense anger, in hate, in prayer. There are intense moments when language is impotent. Then you have to do something. When you are angry, intensely angry, you hit the person, you spit on him, you are saying something. I can understand him. He must have something more to say, that’s why I’m asking, “What next?””

The man was even more puzzled! And Buddha said to his disciples, “I am more offended by you because you know me, and you have lived for years with me, and still you react.”

Puzzled, confused, the man returned home. He could not sleep the whole night. When you see a Buddha, it is difficult, impossible to sleep anymore the way you used to sleep before. Again and again he was haunted by the experience. He could not explain it to himself, what had happened. He was trembling all over, sweating and soaking the sheets. He had never come across such a man; the Buddha had shattered his whole mind and his whole pattern, his whole past.

The next morning he went back. He threw himself at Buddha’s feet. Buddha asked him again, “What next? This, too, is a way of saying something that cannot be said in language. When you come and touch my feet, you are saying something that cannot be said ordinarily, for which all words are too narrow; it cannot be contained in them.” Buddha said, “Look, Ananda, this man is again here, he is saying something. This man is a man of deep emotions.”

The man looked at Buddha and said, “Forgive me for what I did yesterday.”

Buddha said, “Forgive? But I am not the same man to whom you did it. The Ganges goes on flowing, it is never the same Ganges again. Every man is a river. The man you spit upon is no longer here. I look just like him, but I am not the same, much has happened in these twenty-four hours! The river has flowed so much. So I cannot forgive you because I have no grudge against you.

“And you also are new. I can see you are not the same man who came yesterday because that man was angry and he spit, whereas you are bowing at my feet, touching my feet. How can you be the same man? You are not the same man, so let us forget about it. Those two people, the man who spit and the man on whom he spit, both are no more. Come closer. Let us talk of something else.”

This is from a “Intimacy: Trusting Oneself and the Other” (pp. 60–62) by Osho, the guru formerly known as the Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh, who loved collecting white Rolls Royces, and

who ran a commune in Oregon that launched the first biological warfare attack on US soil (they were trying to influence an election).

Osho wasn't above making up stories about the Buddha. Now generally this is unobjectionable, as long as the general points being made by the storyteller are in line with the scriptures. After all, Buddhism started off as essentially an oral tradition, and oral teaching is still an important component in the transmission of the Dharma (as a lived reality, not just as a collection of teachings). It would be ridiculous to say that no teacher could ever put words into the mouth of the Buddha in passing along the teachings in this way. Anyone who's taught has dramatized a sutta or two. I know I have. And in telling a story dramatically we end up inventing dialog. But I think the words we put into the Buddha's mouth should at least not conflict with his teachings, and should preferably be paraphrases.

Unfortunately Osho had none of these scruples. The teaching given here is one that the Buddha would call "nihilistic" — that is, the belief is that the person who acts is not the same person who experiences the consequences of his or her actions, because of the action of change.

The Buddha was in fact once [asked this very question](#) by a Brahmin priest:

The brahmin: Is the one who acts the same one who experiences [the results of the act]?

The Buddha: 'The one who acts is the same one who experiences,' is one extreme.

The brahmin: Then, Master Gotama, is the one who acts someone other than the one who experiences?

The Buddha: 'The one who acts is someone other than the one who experiences,' is the second extreme. Avoiding both of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by means of the middle.

So the teaching that Osho puts into the mouth of the Buddha is one he'd explicitly rejected.

The message of non-resentment and non-reactivity is certainly true to the Buddha's teachings, although not on the basis that "The man you spit upon is no longer here."

Verses three and four of the Dhammapada read:

"He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred.

"He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred.

The Buddha taught mudita ([appreciation](#)) as a way to counteract resentment:

It's impossible, there is no way that — when appreciation has been developed, pursued, handed the reins and taken as a basis, given a grounding, steadied, consolidated, and well-undertaken as an awareness-release — resentment would still keep overpowering the mind. That possibility doesn't exist, for this is the escape from resentment: appreciation as an awareness-release.

He also taught the practice of lovingkindness as a way of avoiding resentment, using a [rather extreme example](#):

Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with good will and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will — abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

Ultimately, though, it's non-clinging to any idea of the self (including the idea that the self does not exist) that leads to the kind of equanimous mind in which resentment doesn't have to be dealt with because it [simply doesn't arise](#). This teaching is from the Alagaddupama Sutta, in which the Buddha says that grasping the Buddha's teaching wrongly is like grabbing a snake by the tail: you're going to end up bitten:

Both formerly and now, monks, I declare only stress and the cessation of stress. And if others insult, abuse, taunt, bother, and harass the Tathagata for that, he feels no hatred, no resentment, no dissatisfaction of heart because of that.

Posted on [October 27, 2014](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) [3 Comments on The man who spit on Buddha's face](#)

## **Buddha was asked: “What have you gained from meditation?” The Buddha replied, “Nothing at all.”**

A reader called Gerald wrote to me recently and asked me about a “fishy” quote:

Hello! I have come across this quote and would like to know your input. (smells fishy). Thank you! Buddha was asked: “What have you gained from Meditation?” He replied: “Nothing.” “However”, Buddha said, “let me tell you what I lost : Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Insecurity, Fear of Old, Age and Death.”

That one's as fishy as a barrel of mackerel.

This particular quote is found in many variants. The locus classicus for this particular version would seem to be Eknath Easwaran's introduction to his translation of the Dhammapada, which itself is the source of a number of Fake Buddha Quotes. Here's the relevant portion of the introduction:

Someone once asked the Buddha skeptically, "What have you gained through meditation."

The Buddha replied, "Nothing at all."

"Then, Blessed One, what good is it?"

"Let me tell you what I lost through meditation: sickness, anger, depression, insecurity, the burden of old age, the fear of death. That is the good of meditation, which leads to nirvana."

That was first published in 1985.

That in turn seems to be based on something published in 1973 — *World Buddhism, Volume 22* — by the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

It may be stating the case too strongly to say that in meditation one seeks to gain nothing. For there is an increase in happiness and peace of mind. But when asked, "What have you gained from meditation?", the answer would be: "It is not what I have gained that is important but rather what I have diminished, namely, greed, hatred, and delusion."

This is clearly not the Buddha who is supposed to be speaking, but simply a hypothetical meditator.

The quote — as indicated — is found in a number of forms on various blogs as well as in a few books. One book attempts to make the quote a bit more similar to the style of the Pali canon by throwing in a "blessed one":

Someone once asked the Buddha: "What have you gained through meditation?" The Buddha replied, "Nothing at all."

"Then, Blessed One, what good is it?"

The Buddha said: "Let me tell you what I have lost in meditation: sickness, depression..."

It would have been better also to have reverted to the traditional "greed, hatred, and delusion" that *World Buddhism* used, especially given that the Buddha was hardly immune to sickness, and in fact died of food poisoning.

Posted on [January 21, 2013](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) [25 Comments on Buddha was asked: "What have you gained from meditation?" The Buddha replied, "Nothing at all."](#)

**[A man said to the Buddha, 'I want Happiness.'](#)**

A man said to the Buddha, "I want Happiness."  
Buddha said, first remove "I", that's ego,  
then remove "want", that's desire.  
See now you are left with only Happiness.

I only recently started seeing this one doing the rounds, and at first I ignored it, because it was so obviously fake that I didn't think anyone would take it seriously, any more than they would think that the Dalai Lama really had gone to a hot dog vendor and asked him to make him one with everything.

And yet, it seems some people really do think that this play on words really is a conversation from some Buddhist scripture. It ain't.

For a start, this joke wouldn't even work in Pāli because its conjugation of verbs is rather different from English. So for example, *hoti* is the Pāli verb to be. While in English we indicate the first person use of this verb by adding a personal pronoun, forming "I am," in Pāli it's the ending of the verb that changes. To say "I am" the verb *hoti* becomes "homi."

So there's no separate word for "I" that we can remove from whatever verb would represent "want" (it might be the verb *kāmeti*, to desire). We'd have to remove "I" and "want" at the same time, since they're inseparable. And maybe that's a more Buddhist teaching, since in Buddhism the problem with our sense of personal identity is that we cling to it.. The Buddha didn't eradicate references to himself from his speech, but he made it clear that there was nothing that he clung to as part of his sense of self. We get rid of the problem of the self by ceasing to cling to the self. The clinging and the clinging to self vanish simultaneously.

I've no idea where this quote originated. I'm assuming that someone was making a little Buddhist-themed joke rather than trying to claim that this is actually a canonical quote, but I haven't, so far, managed to find a source. Or at least not an original one.

Anyway, it would be silly for me to take this little pun too seriously. I only decided to write it up because so many people have been concerned about people who seem to think it might be a genuine scriptural quote. If you're one of those people, I have the address of the Dalai Lama's hot dog vendor, if you're interested. But be warned, you have to have the exact money, because he can't issue change. Change, after all, comes from within.

Posted on [August 16, 2012](#) Categories [Fake Buddha Stories](#) 44 Comments on [A man said to the Buddha, 'I want Happiness.'](#)

## **“One of his students asked Buddha, ‘Are you the messiah?’”**

This one seems to be doing the rounds at the moment.

One of his students asked Buddha, “Are you the messiah?”

“No”, answered Buddha.

“Then are you a healer?”

“No”, Buddha replied.

“Then are you a teacher?” the student persisted.

“No, I am not a teacher.”

“Then what are you?” asked the student, exasperated.

“I am awake”, Buddha replied

This is an awkward one, because nothing the Buddha says is actually inaccurate. After all, he says “no” a lot and then says he’s awake. None of those things is a misquote. And the dialogue kinda sorta happened, but not in the terms used in the quote — but that’s what makes it suspect, because the Buddha’s words have been put in a new, and incongruous, context.

Here’s a translation of portions of [the original sutta](#):

On seeing him, [Dona] went to him and said, “Master, are you a deva [a god]?”

“No, brahman, I am not a deva.”

“Are you a gandhabba [a kind of low-grade god; a celestial musician]?”

“No...”

“... a yakkha [a kind of protector god, or sometimes a trickster spirit]?”

“No...”

“... a human being?”

“No, brahman, I am not a human being.”

...

“Then what sort of being are you?”

...

“Remember me, brahman, as ‘awakened.’”

I’ve done a lot of truncating here, so that the relevant portions of the sutta and the Fake Buddha Quote can be contrasted more easily.

First, who is this “Dona” who is talking to the Buddha? It’s not a “student” of the Buddha, as is stated in the Fake Buddha Quote. It’s a brahmin priest who has seen the miraculous footprints of the Buddha, complete with wheels of 1000 spokes, and who follows the Buddha to question him.

And then there are the categories used in both the fake quote and the sutta. In the fake quote the first category into which Dona tries to pigeonhole the Buddha is “Messiah.” This is very inappropriate language, and in fact it’s straight from the New Testament, [Matthew 11:3](#).

Dona of course doesn’t ask whether the Buddha is the long-awaited savior of the Jews, or if we are to take the term Messiah in its more popular sense, does he ask if the Buddha is a savior of any sort at all. He merely asks if the Buddha is a divine being.

Dona, of course, is not a Buddhist, so he wouldn’t have had a Buddhist understanding of the term “deva.” Devas (gods) in Buddhism are not immortal or spiritually awakened beings. They live mortal lives, although on a vastly longer timescale than our own. And although they may have greater powers than us, those powers are not in a Buddhist sense spiritual. They have no insight. They are not awakened, as the Buddha is. Dona would not have seen the gods this way. Presumably he would have seen them as immortal and spiritually magnificent beings. So the Buddha rules this out. No, he is not a god. I think we can safely assume that in Dona’s mind the terms deva, gandabbha, yakkha, and human being represent progressively less exalted kinds of beings.

Nor does Dona ask the Buddha if he is a healer or a teacher. He’s simply concerned with whether the Buddha is a divine being or a human being. He doesn’t ask about the Buddha in terms of being a teacher or healer.

Dona finally tries asking the Buddha if he could be described using a non-divine category — a human being. The Buddha denies that he is this.

So while something like this dialogue is recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, the terms have been changed a lot, and so I’m going to regard this as a Fake Buddha Quote.

But let’s take a moment to go back to the sutta. The Buddha not only denies that he is a divine being, but he says in effect that he is indefinable. He’s not even definable as a human being.

Brahman, the āsavas [negative mental states] by which — if they were not abandoned — I would be a deva: Those are abandoned by me, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. The āsavas by which — if they were not abandoned — I would be a gandhabba... a yakkha... a human being: Those are abandoned by me, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

There are various ways to interpret this. Here's how I see it. The āsavas are the basis of our clinging and of, therefore, our self-view, which is just one particular form of clinging. The Buddha has no clinging, because the āsavas have been destroyed. Therefore the Buddha does not identify anything (body, mind, etc.) as being "his self." The Buddha lacks any theory of or idea about his own self, and lives without reference to a self. He doesn't define himself. In fact it's because he's a Buddha that he doesn't define himself. And so, the Buddha is essentially undefinable. Those of us who are not Buddhas can certainly try to pigeonhole him into one of the categories we use, but these categories don't match up with how the Buddha sees himself, which is certainly not in terms of any of those categories, or indeed in terms of any category we could imagine.

The Buddha's view of himself is — and I step out of traditional language here — a direct perception of an indefinable "flow" or "process." This process is not perceived as being separate from the world, or as being part of a "oneness" with the world.

And so, [in the words of another sutta](#), "you can't pin down the Tathagata as a truth or reality even in the present life." In fact this sutta, the Anuradha Sutta, leads us through a socratic dialog in which it's made clear that the Buddha has no view of a self. In fact this sutta ends with one of the most misinterpreted lines from the whole Buddhist canon:

"Both formerly and now, it is only suffering that I describe, and the cessation of suffering."

This is often taken to mean that the Buddha only has one purpose, which is to teach suffering and how to end it, but it's clear from other suttas that what the Buddha is saying is that suffering and the end of suffering can exist, without there being a "self" to experience either suffering or its end.

This is a difficult thing for us to get our heads around, and the Buddha admitted when talking about the same topic to a wanderer called Vacchagotta:

"Of course you're befuddled, Vaccha. Of course you're confused. Deep, Vaccha, is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realize, tranquil, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. For those with other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers, it is difficult to know."

## **Postscript**

Those footprints with thousand-spoked wheels! They surely didn't exist. I suppose some might say that Dona saw these by means of psychic powers, but that's not a world view that I buy into.



I'd suggest that the Buddha's "footprints" here refer to his impact on those around him. Perhaps Dona had met people who had been affected by the newly awakened Buddha's personality as he passed by on his wandering, and saw in the reactions of those around him signs of something special. This presentation in terms of the Buddha's divine footprints is a reminder that the Buddhist scriptures were edited for effect, and that reminds us that there is no such thing as a definitive "Genuine Buddha Quote."

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